



## BORDER CROSSINGS? QUEER SPIRITUALITY AND ASIAN RELIGION: A FIRST PERSON ACCOUNT

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### Abstract

*As constructed by conservative religious discourse, homosexuality is antagonistic to spirituality, but in this paper I suggest how marginalised subjectivities might be liberated from toxic, homophobic discourses by 'border crossing': seeking out tools from other cultural traditions to access knowledge resources that can support the urgent inquiry into the nature of the self precipitated by its bruising encounter with institutionally entrenched homophobia. Since the 1960s many men in Western countries have looked 'East' for answers to their metaphysical concerns, counterbalancing what is often assumed to be the one-way process in which 'the West' exerts influence upon 'the Rest'. The subjective repositioning that takes place through such practice occurs not just in cultural spaces, but also within the zone of conscious awareness loosely called the 'mind' as it recovers its roots in a transcultural zone of being/not-being. For the purposes of my discussion I separate the term 'spirituality' from 'religion'. I see 'religion' as a sociological phenomenon, entailing inclusion in/exclusion from socially and politically valorised faith communities. I enlist the Zen Buddhist koan: "What was your face before your parents were born?" to deploy a usage of 'spirituality' as concerned with a searching enquiry into the nature of being, with an emphasis on empirical praxis rather than belief. From such an approach the construction of the personal self produced by political, social and linguistic constructs is radically re-configured, and the non-dual nature of these Asian approaches might allow for an accommodation of spirituality and sexuality.*

### Introduction

Professor David Halperin, speaking at the *Queer Asian Sites Conference* in early 2007, suggested that there is a pressing need to find a new language for positioning queer subjectivities without resorting to the often pathologising discourse of psychology. Drawing on Foucault, he spoke of the process of self-making as the ultimate act of freedom. In this paper, I want to suggest one way of producing a resistant re-narrativisation of queer subjectivities that has been pointedly avoided by queer theory until

now – one that opens up differently ordered pathways for queer intelligence to explore. I will do this by providing a first-hand account of the reclamation of certain spaces that had been occluded by the culture of my religious upbringing (spaces that were explicitly unauthorised by the discursive practices of the Church). I suggest that the language for the reclamation might be forged from new forms of 'spiritual' discourse and praxis, re-framed and detoxified of common religious associations.

Thus far I have achieved this in my own work via a two-pronged approach: firstly, by the disciplined and continuing practice of introspective meditation techniques taught to me by a guru of the Advaita Vedanta tradition of northern India; and, hand in hand with this, through the writing of a memoir, a work in progress titled *The Boy in the Yellow Dress*, which brings certain areas of experience out of the culturally sanctioned silence to which they had heretofore been banished.

As constructed by conservative religious discourse, homosexuality is supposed to be antagonistic to spirituality. As a counter to this I suggest – from personal experience and from the study of texts by other gay memoirists – how marginalised subjectivities might be liberated from homophobic religious discourse by 'border crossing': seeking out tools from other cultural traditions to access differently ordered pathways of being and becoming. To engage in such an approach, I offer a first person account of such an assertive re-positioning to show how men such as myself have been able to draw on knowledge sources (not discursively constructed around notions of sin) that provide affirmative pathways for the expression of queer intelligence.

### The Turn to the 'East'

In his memoir *Defying Gravity*, Dennis Altman writes about becoming aware of oneself as part of a larger social movement. In his words, "all our lives mirror to some extent the larger changes around us; we are shaped by larger social forces in ways we do not necessarily recognise at the time" (1997, p. 5). While Altman might have had other, political trends in

mind, I have come to recognise that it also applies in the conspicuous 'turn to the East' that began early in the twentieth century but became more pronounced in the 1960s and 1970s, when many men in Western countries started looking 'East' for answers to their metaphysical concerns, counterbalancing what is often assumed to be the one-way process in which 'the West' exerts influence upon 'the Rest'. In my own case, turning the geographical compass about, it was to the *North* towards which I looked for inspiration when I found myself suffocating within the heteronormative spaces of my upbringing in redneck West Australia.

With notions of self all too often dislocated by the exclusions attendant on homophobic religious discourse, some gay men have been drawn to the de-centring of the personal self common in Buddhist philosophy and practice. In fact, as I describe elsewhere (Marsh, 2006), the disillusionment that gay men often go through – the dislocation from spaces of belonging produced by Family, Church, Law, and psychological Medicine – can be re-framed as a stripping away of illusions. Further, this process serves as a kind of initiation into a *via negativa*, to use the terminology of mysticism. In such a re-framing, alienation can serve as a kind of cultural 'de-programming', precipitating a searching inquiry into the nature of identity – a process that I propose typifies the 'spiritual' life of men in a queer relationship to heteronormative culture. This could be likened to the Buddhist notion of 'disenchantment', a shakedown that prepares the mind for a penetrating gaze into deeper layers of conscious awareness than are normally presented in the foreground of attention. For the shock of estrangement that results from the insult (Eribon, 2004) of homophobically produced notions of identity often goes further than mere psychological stress, pushing the crisis into a deeper ontological displacement. Struggling for oxygen, queer intelligence is compelled to seek out spaces for its survival and finds itself asking: 'If not this, then what am I?' Entire schools of rigorous spiritual practice begin with this inquiry, the Ramana Maharshi lineage being one potent example (Lata, 1986; Osborne, 1972).

Whereas Western psychotherapies might strive to shore up the security of the ego-centric 'I', spiritual practices more common in Asian religions view the destabilisation of the notion of a continuous self as a thoroughly necessary milestone on the path to 'Liberation'. (Parallels with deconstructive practice are not hard to

draw, and I deal with that comparison elsewhere; see Marsh, 2006.)

For the purposes of my discussion, I separate the term 'spirituality' from 'religion'. I'll deal briefly with the latter first. I see 'religion' as a sociological phenomenon, entailing inclusion in/exclusion from socially and politically valourised faith communities. Here I would enlist Peter Berger's (1969) description of the 'plausibility structures' which typically anchor the sense of belonging in community. "One of the fundamental propositions of the sociology of knowledge", writes Berger, is that the "plausibility" of views of reality "depends upon the social support these receive" (p. 50). According to his analysis, "we obtain our notions of the world originally from other human beings, and these notions continue to be plausible to us in very large measure because others continue to affirm them" (p. 50). "Plausibility structures" are produced by networks of people "in conversation", as he puts it, who hold to a common world-view and set of moral commitments which help to maintain beliefs. While acknowledging that "it is possible to go against the social consensus that surrounds us", Berger reminds us that there are "powerful pressures (which manifest themselves as psychological pressures within our own consciousness) to conform to the views and beliefs of our fellow men." (p. 50).

To continue in a sociological vein, Hans Mol discusses various propositions with regard to theories of identity that define it not as an individual thing alone but as also strongly social.<sup>1</sup> Mol cites Erik Erikson's work, in which identity connotes "both a persistent sameness within oneself and a persistent sharing of some kind of essential character with others" (1976, p. 57) and he notes Berger and Luckmann's (1966) construction that identity is "a phenomenon that emerges from the dialectic between individual and society" (p. 174). Mol also cites Soddy's earlier (1957) definition of identity produced "as an anchorage of the self to the social matrix" (cited in Mol, p. 58). Mol argues that religion provides the mechanism "by means of which on the level of symbol systems certain patterns acquire a taken for granted, stable, eternal, quality" (p. 5), thus "sacralising" identity.

For a sub-set of gay men who feel rejected by the religion of their upbringing, the 'plausibility

<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Michael Carden for pointing me to this work by Hans Mol.

structures', these 'anchorage points to the social matrix' – whether held together by ritual, mythic and symbolic functions, or as institutionalised discourses of meaning and power (in Foucault's analysis) – are not inclusive of them, unless they renounce their sexuality. The normalising functions of social cohesiveness and 'sacralised' identity that create a web of belonging and cohesiveness for some people, position men like me 'outside the fold'<sup>2</sup>, and the reputed 'eternal quality' of a socially constructed self is radically *de*-stabilised.

Alan Watts – an early commentator on the East/West crossover I noted earlier – points to the nexus between the religious and the social in the Judaeo-Christian tradition, which "identifies the Absolute – God – with the moral and logical order of convention" (1957, p. 11). He describes this conflation as "a major cultural catastrophe", and critiques the manner in which "it weighs the social order with excessive authority" (p. 11). If Watts' analysis is correct, his corollary is particularly telling for people marginalised by this kind of construction:

It is one thing to feel oneself in conflict with socially sanctioned conventions, but quite another to feel at odds with the very root and ground of life, with the Absolute itself. (p. 11)

'God', in other words, is a very big stick to wield against others. Many gay men reading this in a Western cultural setting would recognise the promise of inclusiveness offered to them by religion is predicated on a denial of their sexuality, which is represented in the darkest possible tones and negatively sanctioned with the most powerful forces that discourse can muster.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Of course there are some who offer resistance and claim equal rights even in the churches. I refer to the work of Michael Kelly's Rainbow Sash movement in Australia; Andrew Yip's study *The Persistence of Faith* (2002), and memoirs by priests as varied as John J. McNeill (1998) and Bernard Duncan Mayes (2001), and earlier, Malcolm Boyd (1978; 1986), as vigorous examples of men struggling with the 'angel' *within* the Church. The point remains, however, that they are engaged in a struggle for a 'place at the table', to use Bruce Bawer's term (1994).

<sup>3</sup> The misrepresentation of gay people by the Church has not subsided in recent times. Amanda Lohrey's recent study (2006) carries an account of her interviews with young university students who are 'evangelical' Christians and whose attitudes towards homosexuality still carry unreconstructed, moralistic and heteronormative assumptions.

So, if religion is deeply complicit in the perpetuation of the 'excessive authority' of the social order (Watts, 1957), I posit 'spirituality', on the other hand, as another kind of practice altogether. Let me illustrate this by enlisting the kind of interrogation posed by the standard Zen Buddhist *koan*: "What was your original face before your parents were born?" to deploy a usage of 'spirituality' as concerned, first and foremost, with a searching enquiry into the nature of being.

*Koan* practice is a particular technique within certain schools of Buddhism (see Murphy, 2004a), usually carried out in a formal relationship with a spiritual instructor, and accompanied by intensely focused meditation practice. For the Zen master to demand of the student: "Show me your original face before your parents were born" is, in its own context, a form of deconstructive practice that engages the inquiring intelligence in a probing investigation of the roots of its own existence. In this setting, the positioning of self produced by political, social and linguistic discourse is radically re-aligned in relationship to a more broadly based experience of being/awareness, and one that is not centred in the zone of what is usually taken to be the personal self. Rather than finding the roots of self in the complex social and political matrices of place, class, and gender, then, or in the narratives which emanate therefrom, or in the inherent constructedness of language itself, the question becomes: what is 'I' when all the usual predicates of identification fall away? The subjective repositioning that takes place through such practice occurs, *not* in cultural space, and *not* from "the dialectic between individual and society" (Berger & Luckmann, p. 174) but within the zone of conscious awareness loosely called 'mind', as it recovers its roots in a *transcultural* zone of being/not-being.

Tropes of 'emptiness' (Buddhist *shunyata*) are employed to evoke such states, and for Western practitioners sometimes that encounter with the 'Void' can be unsettling (see, for example, Conradi, 2004; Hamilton-Merritt, 1986). Rather than trying to define such a zone – we might call it a 'Ground of Being', as theologian Paul Tillich did, borrowing the concept from Vedanta – the emphasis is not on representation but on *praxis*, and the effect of the practice is to produce a shift in the axis of subjective experience, re-positioning the de-stabilised personal self in an inclusivist re-contextualisation. Conradi (2004) compares the Buddhist view of the self – as "not a fixed or changeless product, but a dynamic

process always seeking an illusory resting-place where it might finally become 'solid'" (p. 80) – with the predicament of the characters in Samuel Beckett's play, *Waiting for Godot*. He sees Didi and Gogo and the others as:

the lonely individual struggling to talk into permanent existence, maintain and freeze something essentially fluid and contingent. Neither Godot nor a solid self will come to save us. This self (ego) spends much time trying to establish personal territory, a nest or cocoon, to defend. (p. 80)

To pick up on my point about gay men's 'disillusionment' process, when that shakedown precipitates a searching inquiry into the nature of being, such a process can be re-framed as a 'spiritual' initiation, as I am using the term; even, perhaps, making it easier for queer folk to 'see through' the contingent nature of socially and discursively produced identities. To push my argument further, the 'liberation' ideal of a 'gay liberation' could be re-framed under the broader rubric 'Liberation', as the term is used in Asian religions. And, if that were true, even in their disillusionment, gay men could be read as 'wounded healers', spiritual teachers, 'way-showers' for others<sup>4</sup> (but that perhaps, would be courting grandiosity).

### Identity as Narrative

I would like to extend my discussion of the destabilisation of conventional constructs of identity with a brief look at the rise of narrative theory as it applies to the theorising of self. Recent theorists of autobiography have brought together a postmodern analysis, whereby the self is seen as a narrative construct, with new approaches to theories of self derived from the neurosciences. For example, in an article for the journal *Narrative*, Eakin (2004) picks up on the argument made by Damasio (1999) "that self is not an effect of language but rather an effect of the neurological structure of the brain" (Eakin,

2004, p. 125).<sup>5</sup> Eakin tries to tackle the narrative identity thesis that is central to my own discussion: viz., that we are or could be said to be a *story* of some kind (Marsh, 2006, pp. 22ff). 'Autobiography', Eakin writes:

is not merely something we read in a book; rather as a discourse of identity, delivered bit by bit in the stories we tell ourselves day in and day out, autobiography structures our living. (p. 122)<sup>6</sup>

Eakin is prompted to pursue the line of enquiry into the equivalence between narrative and identity by a case study from the neurologist Oliver Sacks, and he uses a quote from Sacks as the epigraph for his article:

It might be said that each of us constructs and lives a 'narrative', and that this narrative *is* us, our identities. (p. 121, original emphasis)

Working in the social sciences, Jerome Bruner (1987) uses the same notion, writing that: "the self is a perpetually rewritten story". In the end, Bruner says, "we *become* the autobiographical narratives we tell about our lives" (p. 15, original emphasis).

Narrative theory has become a useful tool in many disciplines, including psychiatry<sup>7</sup>, for, if self is a 'story', it can be told differently, and psychotherapists have exploited the therapeutic potential of re-narrativisations of self. (The work of Michael White on 'narrative therapy' is an obvious example). For gay men, whose sense of self needs to be consciously re-narrativised to reclaim it from the toxic spaces to which it is relegated by homophobic discourse, such autobiographical acts are powerfully politically resistant.

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<sup>5</sup> Damasio's argument is spelled out in *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain* (1995) and developed in *The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness* (1999).

<sup>6</sup> His discussion provoked an ongoing debate in the journal (see Butte, 2005) but Butte's response doesn't address this same issue directly.

<sup>7</sup> Take, for example, this statement from the 2006 annual conference of the Brisbane Centre for Psychoanalytic Studies: "The search for identity is a lifelong and inescapable challenge for every human being. It is evident in the consulting room, in the novel, in the fascination with biography and autobiography, and the unwitting unfolding of a life." The conference brought writers together with psychoanalysts and academics to "explore the construction of the narrative of human experience" in these various fields.

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<sup>4</sup> De La Huerta (1999), would make this case. Also, anthropologist Walter Williams (1992), whose study of the North American indigenous tradition of the *berdache* figure has inspired a generation of gay seekers, quotes an informant, a living Hawaiian *mahu*, as saying: "On the mainland [referring to the United States] the religion doesn't allow a culture of acceptance. Gays have liberated themselves sexually, but they have not yet learned their place in a spiritual sense" (p. 258).

I would like to illustrate this discussion with a personal example.

I am working on a memoir, *The Boy in the Yellow Dress*, in which I trace the life trajectory of a sissy boy growing up in Western Australia, who undergoes bruising encounters with Family, Church, Psychology and the Law. His descent into madness is arrested by an encounter with a young *guru* in the Advaita (non-dualist) Vedanta tradition who shows him that what he has been looking for can only be found within. Whereas the teaching of the church in the boy's own culture is predicated on a denial of his sexuality, the Advaita teaching allows for an accommodation of his sexuality with his spirituality, with increased life, rather than death, as the beneficial outcome.

I will provide a brief reading from the beginning of the memoir, and then extrapolate from that piece of text. The incident described here is probably my earliest memory, and occurred when I was three, or at most four years old.

### Child's Play

*In the formal sitting room, the curtains are drawn. Thick carpet and upholstered furniture muffle all sound. The boy seeks out this place to be alone. But first he goes into the room across the hall, to the wardrobe where his mother's dresses hang, awaiting their brief moments of coming to life (all fullness and motion, then).*

*He climbs up into the wardrobe to reach for one of these, which is special to him. It's dappled yellow, and it glows. He clammers down from the cupboard and slips the gown over his head. Hanging loose around him, its folds cascade lengthily onto the floor. Silky texture is cool where it skims his skin.*

*Women's voices murmur in the kitchen.*

*Suitably attired, the boy returns to the sitting room, where he twirls in the half light, gazing down at the skirt as it rises around him. Entranced by the golden glow, he settles down to sit on his heels and spreads the ample folds of fabric in a perfect circle around him on the floor.*

*Eyes closed, he rests in peace, ears singing in the silence. Dust motes float, lazy, in the light.*

*Sometime later, the dress is returned to its waiting place.*

*But one day when he reaches into the wardrobe the cool fabric isn't there to meet his touch. He wants to catch the magic feeling—wrap it around him, disappear. He tries the cupboard again, but even the most careful iteration of his actions fails to make the dress appear. Instead, there's only a heavy feeling dragging in his chest.*

*Another day: Playing in the wash-house, in the back yard. A copper tub squats above the fireplace where water is boiled to clean the clothes, on Mondays. Sifting through the ashes, he finds the charred remains of the dress... this lovely thing banished to dust in his hands, his magic carpet gone.*

*In the fowl run, a hen murmurs cluck cluck, slow, and the heavy feeling returns to roost in him. Inside the house, a door clicks shut.*

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What is the meaning of this child's play? Perhaps you would expect this will become the life story of a 'transvestite'. You would be right if you assumed that having the dress so thoroughly banished from his playmaking, he *is* left with a sense of loss, but what *is* it that he loses, and what will it take to restore him to wholeness? And what atavistic impulse led a boy to re-create a ritual more common in Siberian shamanism than in suburban West Australia?

At school, he is drawn to the intricate games with skipping ropes but, ears red with the shaming cry of 'sissy', he is shooed away, in the strictly segregated playground, to the *boys'* area, to be tortured by the bruising bounce of a cricket ball. Sex has not reared its ugly head yet (whatever Sigmund Freud might say). Gender certainly has, but rather than wanting to transform himself into a girl, or developing a fetish for dresses, what he yearns for is the state of undifferentiated unity which preceded this either/or bifurcation: if this, not that; you can't be both. Through gender, his exile from the place of peace – his 'homeland', you might call it – is complete.

I propose that in this remembrance, unity is the primary state. Gender could be described, then, as a secondary development (with sexuality as tertiary?). What is queer about the sissy boy is his perverse recall of, and yearning for, the lost

spaces of the self that the forces of cultural conditioning are configured precisely to make him forget.

Recalling this problem, I am reminded of the Sufi teaching story about the woman who loses the keys to her house. Her neighbour finds her searching around in the street and asks her:

What are you doing?  
Oh, she says, I've lost my house keys.  
The neighbour offers to help her look, but after an hour, when a dozen people have gathered, all intent on locating the lost keys, someone asks her:  
Are you sure you lost them here?  
Oh no, she says, I lost them inside the house.  
Then why are you looking for them out here? they ask.  
Why, because the light is better out here, of course, she exclaims.

If what has been lost is inside, how much energy might be wasted looking for the connection where it never was? In the case of this boy who wore the yellow dress, the dislocation is a real event within the psyche, and the *re*-location takes decades to achieve. As the narrative of the memoir unfolds, it becomes apparent that he will re-locate it, not by creating rituals with a fetishised yellow dress, nor through regressive practices in psychotherapy, but via the meditation practices in which he is trained by his guru.<sup>8</sup>

### The 'Home' Self

British expatriate writer Christopher Isherwood (1971), an early, if mostly unrecognised exemplum of the queer spiritual autobiographer, wrote of this yearning as not so much a search for home, as for the 'home self'. Recalling the loss of identity experienced when he was packed off to an cold and impersonal boarding school, later Isherwood was able (after several decades of meditation practice) to write: "I suppose that this loss of identity is really much of the painfulness which lies at the bottom of what is called Homesickness; it is not Home that one cries for, but one's home-self" (p. 285).

The Persian devotional poet Rumi advises:

Once you have tied yourself to selflessness, you will be delivered from selfhood and released from the snares of a hundred ties, so come, return to the root of the root of your own self. (1994, p. 40)

The final line: "come, return to the root of the root of your own self" is repeated at the end of each verse. It seems that Rumi is saying that to be delivered from a certain set of identifications (from selfhood, in fact) is a kind of relief. Once again, whereas the focus in Western forms of therapy might be intended to shore up the sense of a well-defined ego, spiritual practices common in other cultures could be said to actively court the dissolution of the relatively 'illusory' construction.<sup>9</sup>

Back in childhood, the sissy boy, who lacks access to other ways of thinking about his condition, learns that he is not one of the 'real' people. He tries to fit in, hide the parts that don't fit, but for him there is, always, the sense of exile. In the place of the state of undifferentiated unity – that everyone else seems to want him to forget – he is taught that his instinct for re-union is downright pathological, that he is fundamentally flawed; and he learns to be ashamed. What the parents cannot see is that, rather than signifying a wrong-bodied desire to be a girl, the dress is a portal for re-entry into a pre-gendered, non-dualistic state of unified awareness.

He also learns other important 'facts' along the way, both within his family, where he feels like a cuckoo in the wrong bird's nest, as well as from the wider society, which labels him a freak. From Medicine he will learn that he is a pathology; from the Church, that he is an abomination (Hebrew 'toevah'); that to the Law he is an *outlaw*. Unable to love 'properly', he might even accept that he is some sort of biological error.

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<sup>9</sup> Notwithstanding this, the rot set in with the introduction of the Unconscious into Western psychoanalytic discourse; Freud's famous dictum that 'the ego is not master in its own house' was emblematic of the shift:

[M]an's craving for grandiosity is now suffering the third and most bitter blow from present-day psychological research which is endeavouring to prove to the 'ego' of each one of us that he is not even master in his own house, but that he must remain content with the veriest scraps of information about what is going on unconsciously in his own mind. (Freud, 1916-17, p. 285)

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<sup>8</sup> This essay does not allow me the space to deal with the potential problem of 'narcissistic regression', but I do intend to defend the practice against reductionist neo-Freudian representations in a later paper.

So he studies early the art of concealment, trying to 'pass' as one of the real people. He watches life as through a glass, and has no one to guide him through the maze of his own confusing feelings. If he persists in his perversity, he might have to learn to lead with his chin, turning himself into a rebel, thrusting his difference defiantly in the faces of his mockers. Or he might pick up on the chorus of 'eat, drink, and be merry...' and *make sure* that tomorrow he dies (an early death, in too many cases). 'If I am an error,' he reasons from his pain, 'I will rub myself out. I am not supposed to be here, anyway.'

Being so at odds with my own culture, with the values of my own family, and colonised by the hegemonic meanings of the social/political/religious matrix, more and more I found that it was my sexuality that seemed to mark me out. I had a choice: either to reject that sexuality, or, in an act of existential defiance, embrace it. But was this sexuality, as constructed within a very particular set of historical and cultural discursive circumstances, a sufficient basis around which to construct an identity? It was a very uncomfortable fit, to be sure, and in many ways it would prove downright dangerous.

According to Michel Foucault's (1978) analysis, "in the space of a few centuries, a certain inclination has led us to direct the question of what we are, to sex" (p. 78). Following Foucault's lead, I question what has been occluded by the practice of seeing things only through that lens, what other knowledge sources denied in the formation of a queer identity strictly around the axis of sexuality. I ask: Who is a 'homosexual' when he is not having sex? For my queer nature, as I have tried to suggest here, was in evidence *before* my desire first focused on other men. Sexuality was a secondary development of the real roots of my queerness, which I now locate in the perverse longing for lost unity. Meanwhile, the space opened up shamanistically by the ritual with the dress remained unexplored, its resonances muted, its luminosity banished to the shadows.

### Fromm's Filter

In his essay "Psychoanalysis and Zen Buddhism" (1960), psychoanalyst and cultural critic Erich Fromm wrote:

[E]xperience can enter into awareness only under the condition that it can be perceived, related and ordered in terms of a conceptual

system and of its categories. This system is in itself a result of social evolution. Every society, by its own practice of living and by the mode of relatedness, of feeling, and perceiving, develops a system of categories which *determines* the forms of awareness. This system works, as it were, like a socially conditioned filter...

and, he asserts, "*experience cannot enter awareness* unless it can penetrate this filter" (p. 99, emphasis added).

I would say that the categories of the dominant conceptual system not only placed the forms of my *sexual* expression out of bounds, but actually worked as a filter against me becoming aware of what I am now able to identify as the *real* roots of my queer nature, in this awareness of primary unity I accessed spontaneously through my cross-dressing child's play.

The incident with the dress was not an isolated event. Throughout my life I have been blessed (or cursed) with an urge to reconnect with this something that I felt I had lost, and my journey has been punctuated by moments of synchronous intrusion into mundane awareness by certain events which shifted me into what you might call 'altered states', like a 'tap on the shoulder' reminding me: there's something more. Memoir writing becomes a way of summoning from the silences of cultural occlusion experiences opened up through dreams, through synchronous interactions with the natural world, and spontaneous shafts of insight from some other, out-of-the ordinary frame of reference.

But these experiences were outside the conceptual system of 'social categories' (Fromm, 1960) in which I grew up. There was no reinforcement from the culture of my upbringing – neither from family, nor church, nor education – to assist me in interpreting the meaning of these moments. Many of them lingered with me as luminous talismans which have only slowly given up their significance when recollected in quiet retrospect, and usually not through rational analysis.

As these had to do with states that were not mediated by language, nor through social interactions, I classify them as a form of spontaneous spirituality. I acknowledge that such a discussion might cause concern for some queer academics who would ask: What is a gay man doing talking about 'religious' experience at all? Hasn't 'religious' discourse been the original

source of homophobic rhetoric? Religion and sexuality are uncomfortable bedmates at any time, and *homosexuality*, in the culture in which I grew up, was completely beyond the pale. Religion itself, indeed, was part of the filtering system described by Fromm that would not allow those experiences to which I have referred to even *enter into awareness*.

Writing a memoir has been a way of re-inserting experience from culturally sanctioned silence into awareness, in this present time. Some recent theoretical work on life-writing takes up this possibility. Smith and Watson (1996), for example, build a case for life-writing as a means of critical intervention into post-modern life. They identify autobiographical narrative as a 'performative' display and describe "the many means by which models of acceptable identity are circulated and renewed in society", analysing "how state, church, school, corporation, government and the advertising industry secure normative subjects in acceptable social relationships" (p. 12). There are echoes of Foucault here, especially the notions of 'technologies of power' and 'government'.<sup>10</sup> In specific situations, Smith and Watson say, people may "choose not to narrate the stories that are prescribed for them", opting instead to "reframe the present by bringing it into a new alignment of meaning with the past" (p. 12).

Writing autobiographically, then, becomes a resistant strategy for re-narrativising the self, an assertive recontextualising that recovers meaning from the toxic narratives buried within hostile discourses. "Seizing the occasion and telling the story", say Smith and Watson, "turns speakers into subjects of narrative who can exercise some control over the meaning of their lives" and this assertion, they say, is "particularly compelling for those whose personal histories include stories that have been culturally unspeakable" (pp. 13-14). Writing autobiographically is a means whereby Fromm's filter may be effectively finessed. 'Lost' experience can be recovered and allowed to

enter into awareness through autobiographical acts of creative re-narrativisation.

### 'Spirituality' vs 'Religion'

If by now we are familiar with the inscription of, say, the 'coming out' story as one form of this resistant practice, I am making a case for narratives of *spiritual* inquiry as I have defined it to be 'authorised', if you will, by the same rationale, and I argue that queer theory itself might choke on its own orthodoxies if it becomes too rigid to allow for a re-appraisal of spirituality as a knowledge resource in the assertive reconfigurations of identities.

Many conscientious gay men and lesbians will continue to find that religion is irremediably tainted by homophobia and sexism, and find my own work problematic in this regard. This is one of the reasons why I pursue the distinction between 'spirituality' and 'religion'. Halperin (2007) speaks of the need for getting beyond psychology to define subjectivity. The same could apply here, with religion. Hence my use of an Eastern model, deploying a usage of the term 'spirituality' as concerned particularly with a searching enquiry into the nature of being. The distinction is somewhat artificial – with some obvious overlapping – but has been widely adopted, from 'high' to 'low' culture and, increasingly, is characterised by a distinct shift away from some of the traditional religious constructions, to the point where the terms 'spirituality' and 'religion' are increasingly used to signify different kinds of practice.

Anna King (1996), for example, is a theologian who suggests that the term 'spirituality' is often used nowadays to *avoid* the use of the term 'religion', which is increasingly associated with more traditional (and oppressive) ideas. King echoes Carrette's comparison with Artaud's 'non-religious use' of the term 'spirituality' to signify:

an escape from the unnecessary confines of religion into the more inclusive realm of our common humanity, rendering any necessary reference to the transcendent obsolete. (cited in King, 1996, p. 343)

The distinction is increasingly common at the level of popular culture, too. Hip-hop artist, rap musician Wanda Dee (2004), of KLF, describes it this way:

<sup>10</sup> By 'government' Foucault was referring not so much to the mechanics of the modern state as the way in which individuals or groups might be directed to act, so to 'govern', in this sense, is to delimit the field of action. Foucault examined technologies of power as varied as prisons, religious traditions, medical and psychological discourses, education, and so on. For all the different forms they might take, 'Technologies of power' share this common strategy.



Spirituality is the uninterrupted knowledge of God within self. Religion is man-made. I pride myself on being spiritual and not at all religious. (p. 13)

Historically, in the West, 'spirituality' has not been distinguished from 'religion', but under the impact of secularisation (that much debated term) more and more people who have found themselves in cognitive dissonance with the metanarratives supplied by religious doctrines, and increasingly dissatisfied with the politics of the institutions with which such doctrines have been associated, have begun to insist on a similar distinction. When Peter Berger let the secularisation cat out of the bag in the early 1960s, he claimed that religion itself was becoming marginalised. He was later to regret the way the secularisation thesis was being deployed<sup>11</sup>, but in 1969, in his seminal text, *A Rumour of Angels*, he identified it happening not so much to social institutions – given the increasing separation between church and state – but as applying "to processes inside the human mind", producing "a secularisation of consciousness" (p. 16).

At that time Berger felt that the expansion of the state meant that religion was losing its primary role as the 'legitimater' of social life, and this was producing a trend towards pluralisation of beliefs and practices. Berger claims this was predicted as early as 1915 by Max Weber, who foresaw that capitalism would produce a rational (and scientific) worldview leading to secularisation and the 'disenchantment'<sup>12</sup> of the world. So, when 'church' religion was undergoing a noticeable membership decline, Berger's colleague Thomas Luckmann (1967) wrote that religion itself had moved to the margins of society, because "the internalisation of the symbolic reality of traditional religion is neither enforced nor, in the typical case, favoured by the social structure of contemporary society" (p. 37).

This dis-location of religious discourse from the centre of social value systems is producing outcomes too complex to be analysed in this paper, but it is still difficult today to extricate moral and ethical norms prevailing in the wider,

secular society from antique religious teachings on sexuality. A case could be made, though, that this secularisation process has had the perhaps unexpected effect of liberating conscientious men who are in search of spiritual re-connections from being confined to one exclusivist, totalising pathway for discovery, and has contributed to the 'border crossing' phenomenon that I alluded to at the beginning of this paper. Marginalised by heteronormativity, and perhaps less obliged to uphold the ruling metanarratives, we are free to explore and seek out tools that assist our inquiries wherever we find them.

I suggest that empirical practices common in Asian spiritual technologies can contribute to the liberation of queer intelligence in the West, and that it should become possible to discard all of the 'God' talk, without throwing away the baby with the bathwater.

So, to return to the situation of the sissy boy left grieving his loss – not of the dress, but of the state of unified awareness. Rejected by the religion he found around him, a stranger in his own family, pathologised by psychological medicine, with his disillusionment compounded by the discredited political indoctrinations of a military-industrial complex waging war in Vietnam, he becomes one of the 'seeker' generation of the 1960s<sup>13</sup>, looking beyond his own culture for 'home'.

Like many of his generation, he took a guru, who taught him a life-saving technique of meditative introspection that re-connected his alienated subjectivity within a field of being-consciousness (Sanskrit 'sat-chit-anand') – the very shift that I described earlier.

## Two-Way Traffic

In preparing this paper I have had to ask myself if I have been participating in a kind of neo-colonial exploitation. Am I indulging in a typically flagrant Western eclecticism, plundering other cultures' knowledge resources, taking up certain parts of various traditions while leaving others aside, as Hamilton (1995) might charge? I would make the case that the traffic moves in both directions. For example, the political events that led to the flight of the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama out of

<sup>11</sup> Berger's important work on the sociology of knowledge (and of religion) has produced a rich field of scholarly discussion that I will not be able to delve into here. See Woodhead, Heelas and Martin (2001) for a discussion of his legacy.

<sup>12</sup> It is interesting to note the different use of this term, 'disenchantment' in a Buddhist context, where it is part of a necessary stripping away of delusions.

<sup>13</sup> See Roof (1993) for a discussion of the "spiritual journeys of the baby boomer generation". There is a rich and diverse literature that usefully problematises such a major cross-cultural phenomenon.

Tibet have been accompanied by the export of that form of Buddhism by a host of Lamas trained in its various traditions who have established dozens of centres for the dissemination of the teachings in various countries. Even before this movement had started, D.T. Suzuki and others had begun presenting aspects of Buddhism – in its manifestation as Zen – to a receptive audience in the United States, Britain, and Europe, with key intellectuals such as Alan Watts, Aldous Huxley, Christopher Isherwood, Erich Fromm, and others, beginning a cross-cultural conversation that continues today.

Buddhism, of course, is the prime example of a hybridised cultural praxis – travelling across borders into new areas and being modified, in turn, by local influence. Witness its long historical movement out of northern India, into the south, through S.E. Asia, and into China, and then on to Japan, centuries before the Dalai Lama was forced into exile.<sup>14</sup> The meditation practice in which I have been trained was brought out of India by a young Indian guru in the early 1970s, and he has continued to work, for the past three and a half decades, to make the introspective technology of meditation and other practices available globally.<sup>15</sup> In the process, he has increasingly ‘secularised’ the presentation of his technique and avoids indoctrinating practitioners into a kind of hybridised cultural Hinduism. Nor is he interested in providing totalising answers, but rather provides tools for individuals to use to explore the conundrum of their own existential beingness, wherever they might find themselves located – geographically, culturally, and ideologically.

### In Conclusion

I will finish by recalling a discussion between Michel Foucault and a Buddhist teacher, during Foucault’s stay in a Japanese Zen temple, in 1978. Responding to the rōshi’s questioning of the real depth of his interest in Japan, Foucault said that he was more interested in “the Western history of rationality and its limits”. “In reality”, he said, “that rationality constructs colonies everywhere else” (Carrette, 1999, p.

111).<sup>16</sup> They discussed the ‘crisis of Western thought’ and the priest asked Foucault if he felt that Eastern thought could ‘allow’ Western thought to “find a new way” (p. 113). Foucault identified the crisis as “identical to the end of imperialism” and agreed that to confront Western thought with Eastern thought could be one avenue for re-examination (the others being “psychoanalysis, anthropology and the analysis of history” [p. 113]). He also proposed that a “philosophy of the future” must be born “outside of Europe”, or “in consequence of meetings and impacts between Europe and ‘non-Europe’” [p. 113]).

It may be that, due to the alienation and dislocations they experience, queer folk are particularly well suited to meeting in cross-cultural spaces. As Leila Ahmed (2000) says:

The truth is, I think that we are always plural. Not either this or that but this and that. And we always embody in our multiple shifting consciousnesses a convergence of traditions, cultures, histories coming together in this time and this place and moving like rivers through us... I know now that it is of the nature of being in this place... that there will always be new ways to understand what we are living through, and that I will never come to a point of rest or of finality in my understanding. (pp. 25-6)

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### Author Note

Originally a graduate of the University of Western Australia in the mid-1960s, Victor Marsh was recently awarded his PhD at the University of Queensland. In between, a varied career path took him through theatre, television, and a decade as a modern-day monk, when he

<sup>14</sup> Reflected in the linguistic shifts: Sanskrit *dhyān*; Chinese *Chā’an*; Japanese *Zen*.

<sup>15</sup> My teacher’s personal name is Prem Rawat; sometimes he is addressed by the honorary title of respect familiar in India: ‘Maharaj ji’.

<sup>16</sup> Foucault’s hint that rationalism is another form of colonialism is provocative, and is pertinent to any discussion of how other cultures and practices use the mind and how subjectivities are differently configured, culturally. Coming from an anthropological standpoint, S.J. Tambiah unpacks the implications of rationality as a mode of reasoning, and as a process of constructing knowledge. The issue has special importance when dealing with translation between cultures and the means by which scholars from one culture translate phenomena into categories and concepts of their own culture. (See Tambiah, 1990, pp. 111 ff.)

taught meditation on behalf of his guru in a dozen countries in Asia, North America, and the South Pacific.

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